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ABSTRACT

The depth and pervasiveness of linguistic symbols of sexual identity, difference, and hierarchy are discussed in this paper. After noting that the language of sexism begins at birth and is recognized and used by preschool children, the paper points to patterns of linguistic sexism in the semantics and syntax of the English language, in written and spoken language about women and men, and in women's and men's use of verbal and nonverbal aspects of language. Among the topics dealt with are the following: the way female-associated language is defined not only by men but in terms of women's sexual relationship with men; frequent descriptions of nature and the land in images and metaphors of female sexuality and submission; the linguistic invisibility and pejoration of the female as reflected in the use of so-called "generics" and the adding of female markers (poet"ess") to distinguish women's achievement as deviant from the male norm; the way the English language teaches a prescriptive sociopolitical grammar that perpetuates the symbol systems of patriarchy; and differences in women's and men's language that reflect expectations of male dominance and female submission. The paper concludes by noting the penalties and risks encountered by those who attempt to change the restricted codes of thinking, speaking, and behaving. (GT)

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The Doublespeak of Sexism

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The language of sexism begins at birth. As soon as the baby's sex is identified and announced, the gender expectations of significant others color the verbal and nonverbal messages directed to the infant and said about it. Even before the child is born, its sex is the characteristic most discussed and anticipated. Girl and boy first names are chosen, a pink or blue color scheme, and, of course, the father's last name is attached automatically. If the child is male, hospital attendants may refer to him by his last name, the "Jones infant," if female, she is likely to be called a "sweetie" or "cutie" instead of by a name.[1]

"X: A Fabulous Child Story," by Lois Gould suggests how difficult it is to reverse the symbols of sexism and socialize a child of unidentified sex by regarding "X" from birth as a child-person instead of a girl or boy. The Official Instruction Manual devised by the "x-perimenters" contains over 4,000 pages anticipating the kinds of problems "X's" parents will face in desexing their own language and behavior in raising "X" as well as in helping "X" cope with a culture rampant with sexist attitudes and institutions.[2] The length and complexity of the Manual are

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indicative of the depth and pervasiveness of symbols of sexual identity, difference, and hierarchy.

"X" would not be addressed by adults in a rough and tumble "Hail-Baby-Well-Met" style often reserved for infant boys nor with the verbal and physical gentleness characterizing contact with infant girls.[3] But "X" would soon learn from its pre-school and kindergarten chums that the girls had already begun to define themselves as females and inferior to males, and boys had learned to express their male difference in the aggressive expressions and strong epithets of male language. In a content analysis of the language of kindergarten children, for example, Sauce found that boys were verbally more inquisitive and aggressive than girls in word quantity and content and displayed more interest in space. physical movement, and self. The only category more frequently referenced by girls than boys indicated their greater interest in the female role.[4] In addition, "X's" friends may have already learned to modulate their voices in accordance with their sexual identity. Even though the articulatory mechanism in young boys and girls is similar before puberty, girls may have already learned to imitate the high-pitched "weak" female voices that are subdued by the deeper gruff male voices that young boys identify with and imitate.[5]

In addition to using sex differentiated language, pre-school girls and boys can also distinguish between male and female associated language. Nursery school boys and girls interviewed by Garcia-Zamor, for example, consistently associated aggressive expressions as male and tag questions as female.[6] The realization

that sex-differentiated language conforms to the stereotypes and is recognized and used by young children should add at least another 1,000 pages to the first part of "X's" Instruction Manual!

Unfortunately, such messages and language use do not simply identify and differentiate males from females and "femininity" from "masculinity," but construct a mythic-conceptual framework that underlies and justifies our cultural values, power structure, and perceptions and attitudes toward self, other, and environment. The masculine becomes the cultural norm, and the feminine, "the other," speaking a deviant language without status and thereby unworthy of imitation. In internalizing the accoutrements of their sexual identities, females and males unconsciously use linguistic parameters -- syntax, lexicon, intonation, pitch, and body language -- to communicate, maintain, and ritualize the socio-political structures of patriarchy.

"X" and its parents would need to be vigilant in recognizing the features of linguistic sexism as they appear: first, in the semantics and syntax of the English language; second, in written and spoken language about women and men; and third, in women's and men's use of verbal and nonverbal aspects of language. The patterns that I will briefly review will be enlarged by other members of the forum as well as speakers on the various panels dealing with aspects of women and language.

First, in English semantics, feminine qualities perceived in people and projected on to natural phenomena have negative cultural value and negative connotation by association. Muriel Schulz's paper on "The Semantic Derogation of Woman" is rich with

examples of the historical pejoration of English terms for women to meanings charged with sexual looseness and male hostility, whereas those for men have been ameliorated,[7] and Julia P. Stanley's paper, "Paradigmatic Woman: The Prostitute" lists 220 terms for sexually promiscuous women in a constantly expanding lexicon and only 22 for promiscuous men.[8] Since our culture is largely "man-made," the uni-dimensional perception of women as creatures varying in degrees of sexual availability and desirability for men can be credited to the self-serving double standard/double-speak of the group in power. In all levels of communication and in almost all its parameters, what is said by or about women is of less value than what is said by or about men.

The same holds true for their behavior. Sexual promiscuity is a positive aspect of "masculinity," whereas in the female, it is sinning itself. "Whore" we assume is [+female] until a gender marker -- "male whore"-- is added. There are words like "spinster" which are decidedly female and negative in connotation and not transferable to men (male spinster is not used), but have an alternative positive [+male] term -- "bachelor." As soon as a [+female] gender marker or meaning is added to a word, its connotation becomes increasingly negative. Whether one says, "female, woman, or lady doctor," the image is not as positive nor [+male] as saying just "doctor."

Robin Lakoff points out that labels and metaphors "like the word professional" tend to have a wider more general reference when applied to men than to women. To say "he is a professional" means that he is a member of any established profession, but

calling a woman a "professional" usually implies the more narrow association with the "oldest profession."[9] Women and female associated language are not only defined by men but in terms of their sexual relationship to men. From the cradle to the grave, women pass as either virgins, whores, wives, or mothers. Whatever their age or sexual experience, they are usually referred to as the "girls" or some other diminutive like "baby" or "the little woman" or a dehumanizing term like "doll" -- all suggesting their dependence, like perpetual children, on men for definition and life.

By extension, Nature and the land that man subdues and conquers are frequently described in images and metaphors of female sexuality and submission. Man has cast the earth as a protective, nurturing Mother when her fruits were abundant, a chaste unblemished Virgin when her territory lay unexplored, or a fecund, seductive Mistress when her beauty mystified and enthralled him. Perceived in such language, the earth was bound to share in women's submission to the conquering male explorer and plunderer.

Annette Kolodny's book, The Lay of the Land documents how the vocabulary of the American pastoral portrayed the "land-as-woman" and expressed man's conflict between raping and dominating the land and living intimately with "her" beauty. According to Kolodny, man's ambivalence between erotic desire for the virginal or seductive woman and a filial need for the protective mother's womb or breast not only characterized his language but also his behavior to the "land-as-woman" as well as to "woman-as'woman."[10] It is no surprise that the mentality that perceived the natural environment as an object of desire and conquest relied upon the imagery and attitudes of male domination of women.

Sexist language, as a feature of doublespeak, maintains a double standard and double meaning for language about males and females and restricts our options to perceive self and world through other lenses. In this sense, "doublespeak" implies a double code and grammar for social behavior and language usage -- one for and about women; the second for and about men -- each governed by stereotyped definitions. We don't need 1984 to remind us that the party in power controls language and the communication media and creates a "Newspeak" that deliberately reduces vocabulary and the range of meaning. As such, limiting the semantic space of words like "pioneers, managers, doctors, etc. to [+male] and reducing lexical options to masculine marked generics -- "man, mankind, he, etc." -- except for stereotypically feminine behavior, not only keeps Big Brother's party visible and dominant, but also minimizes, subordinates, ignores, absorbs, or totally erases from language, history, and memory the contribution and existence of women. Like Newspeak, sexist doublespeak diminishes the range of thought to male dominance and achievements and restricts language to sex differentiated usage. Of course, a doublespeak argument is used to justify masculine marked "generics" as all inclusive terms subsuming female and implying both female and male. But the same thinkers would not jump on the bandwagon for "womankind" as a true generic or recognize the double standard in choosing "man" over "woman" as a generic term.

A careful reading of a few so-called "generics" in context will demonstrate that they are, more often than we think, pseudo-generics since their referent is either gender specific, or at best, ambiguous:

1. A businessman wants his secretary around when he needs her.

   (Louis A. Leslie. Gregg Shorthand for Colleges, Vol. I. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1968.)

2. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife. (Exod., 20:19)

3. This book is dedicated to those who work toward achievement of the initial right of man to be born without handicap and the privilege of woman to bear without injury.

   (Dedication page from Principles and Management of Human Reproduction, quoted in "No Comment," Ms. Magazine, March, 1977, p. 94.)

In light of the preceding illustrations and the abundant citations of Julia Stanley and others,[11] to protest that English "generics" are not sex specific not only maintains and covers up a narrow range of meaning, but argues in the doublespeak fashion of the Ministry of Truth that "Ignorance is Strength; Specific is General; and False is True."

Other kinds of linguistic invisibility and pejoration of the feminine are reflected in the tradition of both wife and children adopting the name of the pater familias and adding feminine markers, as in poetess, authoress, and lady judge, to distinguish women's achievement as deviant from the male norm. The need for such markers confirms the sex specific meaning of the occupational term and its pseudogeneric usage. Illustrations of doublespeak semantics abound in double treatment of males and females in American English: (1) the number of terms with visible masculine markers in American English outnumbers the feminine by 3:1; (2) negative connotation is more frequently a feature of a feminine word than a masculine one; (3) there are more negative words associated with the feminine; (4) the feminine term appears last in word order -- guys and dolls; boys and girls; and men and women;[12] and second in frequency of

usage in illustrative material in textbooks and dictionary devised sentences;[13] (5) in descriptions, women are generally identified in terms of their physical appearance and relationship to men, i.e.,"Mrs. Howard Strong, a tall blond mother of two children," and men in terms of their accomplishments and professions; and (6) in word choice -- girls giggle and women cackle whereas boys laugh and men guffaw.

When a New York Times book review lists the admirers of Ring Lardner as "Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Falukner, Sherwood Anderson, Edmond Wilson, H. L. Menchen, and millions of others, including Virginia Woolf, a woman,"[14] the marker is not only superfluous since her full name is given, but "Woolf" is also syntactically and semantically segregated from the other writers, and identified with the "millions of others," only as a last minute inclusion at the end of the list.

Linguistic sexism is not only characterized by syntactic subordination of the feminine, but semantic and syntactic invisibility as well. In researching an article on "Quilts: The Great American Art," Patricia Mainardi found that even though women's contribution to quilt making was being discussed, she was syntactically omitted as subject in passive voice structures: "'quilts were made,' quilting was done,' 'names changed,' but never 'women made quilts, or women changed the names.'"[15] The disappearance of feminine terms as active subjects in sentences and contexts concerned with women's achievement is a subtle kind of double-speak structure. The tendency to omit women as subjects in "history" is also reflected in "his-syntax."

Not only is the English language a "restrictive code" limiting what could be said, thought, believed, and perceived about women and men, but it is also used as a "restrictive code." The ways in which women are spoken of are bound to be reflected in what women are expected to learn to do and to say in subordinating themselves to men and differentiating their sex from the other. By not believing in its inherent superiority or inferiority, what "genderlect" would our "X" child learn to use? Most likely a language based on the demands of the social context, its personality, motives, and objectives, and not one based on sexual identity.

In Body Politics, Nancy Henley has argued convincingly that besides differentiating the sexes and perpetuating sex stereotypes, verbal and nonverbal language maintains the power structure in teaching us what is permissible in sex-differentiated linguistic performance.[16] We learn a prescriptive socio-political grammar that communicates, ritualizes, and perpetuates the symbol systems of patriarchy: girls should not talk too much or use obscene language, especially to boys, and boys should not shatter feminine fragility with gruff vulgarities. Women's language then operates as a "restricted code" -- their linguistic "performance," (the actual use of language in concrete situations) limits women's social behavior and sense of self to submissive powerless roles vis-à-vis men. Researchers investigating published words and images and actual behavior in experimental conditions are uncovering patterns of sex-differentiation and dominance underlying a grammar of male/female social interaction. The sex-linked rules of social interaction are internalized and codified in all the

verbal and nonverbal messages that define men and women -- the linguistic sexism just described, parental admonitions, social etiquette, religious beliefs, and other institutions of socialization.

Sex differences have been observed in word choice, syntax, content, intonation, terms of address, self-disclosure, style, quantity of words and interruptions, and fluency in spoken and written language collected from popular culture as well as live male/female interactions. Many of these variables will be discussed in greater detail by other panelists, but, in general, we're discovering that the way women and men speak, are expected to speak, and are spoken about are based on the stereotypes and the socio-political hierarchy. Women's language is expected to have more weakness, uncertainty, submissiveness, and emotion as well as less intelligence than men's.

Lakoff suggested and others have observed that women's language is more likely to have greater use of intensifiers like "surely, really, quite, so, awfully," and qualifiers like "sort of, somewhat, kind of," as well as sex-linked vocabulary. That is, women are more likely to use delicate, trite words like, "nice, pretty, adorable," and men swear words and slang. Women and men also have different word domains consonant with their occupational and sex roles. Women are also more likely to use a vocabulary associated with feelings, internal psychological states, and the personal sphere, whereas men use more words implying time, space, quantity, and external action. Syntactic expressions of uncertainty are reflected in women's greater use of tag questions,

"The food is good, isn't it?" use of modals and polite forms instead of direct commands, "Would you please make sure the lights are off?" and in general, greater use of interrogative instead of declarative sentences.[17] Since not all content analyses have found the same features, nor have differences been significantly consistent, we need to consider other factors -- personality, social situation, and topic, for instance, that affect sex differences in language while holding social class, age, and education constant.

In examining 21 pieces of literature written by an equal distribution of female and male writers in the Ladies Home Journal, 1900-1920, Berryman found that sex-linked language distinctions in major male/female character interactions confirmed many features described by Lakoff and others. Female characters used more polite exclamations like, "oh and well," intensifiers, qualifiers, and tag questions. Females also had a greater quantity of messages and number of words per message,[18] which is consistent with studies by Cheris Kramer[19] and others, where subjects recognized women's language from several criteria including wordiness. But in live interactions, rather than speaking more, women tended to speak less and to acquiesce to male interruptions and dominance.

In general, studies of live male/female interactions contradict the popular belief that women talk more than men. When amount of verbal interaction was measured, males used more words, talked more often, and, in mixed groups, interrupted females more frequently than females interrupted males. Men not only spoke more often but also tended to use verbal and nonverbal cues to

direct the topics of conversation toward occupational, worldly and male-oriented interests.[20]

In live male/female dyads, sex-linked paralinguistic aspects of verbal behavior, such as voice quality, pitch, intonation, phonetic variation, and interruption, in signaling dominance, superiority, and subordination, suggest a learned interactive grammar of double rules, a double standard, and therefore, a "doublespeak." By intoning declarative statements as interrogatives instead of assertions, for example, women reflect the uncertain syntax of the tag question -- "We need to buy a new car (?)."

Studies of sex differences in verbal interaction suggest that sex role expectations of male dominance and female submission govern the rules and patterns of behavior in sex-mixed groups. The asymmetrical use of linguistic cues and interactive rules does not simply signal sex-differentiated language, but sex-differentiated power!

Time does not permit me to elaborate on women's restricted nonverbal code except to suggest that vocabulary, semantics, syntax, i.e., structure and arrangement of nonverbal communication parameters of space, time, body posture, movements, gestures, etc., are analogous to the verbal parameters just discussed in reflecting and sustaining power relationships.

Henley identified ten gestures of power and privilege -- forms of address, demeanor, posture, personal space, time, touching, eye contact, facial expression, emotional expression, and self-disclosure -- in which men follow patterns used by the superior in interactions between status unequals and women, patterns

used by the subordinate. When women and men are intimates, however, usage tends to be symmetrical, that is they both use patterns identified with those superior in status.[21]

In general, women are less apt to have a room of their own or to sprawl and stretch themselves beyond the constricted boundaries of prescribed femininity --if not petite, they are expected to slouch into looking and sounding smaller than any male they may accompany, condensing their little space even more with tightly crossed legs and folded hands. Their time, like their space, is unimportant and easily violated.

As part of what Goffman calls the "ritualization of subordination" in advertisements, males touch females more frequently in conversation and are pictured more often as higher than women and holding and cuddling, or carrying them.[22] As a result, women tend to be pictured as "looking up to men" usually with a fixed smile of submission. According to Henley, whatever features may characterize women's verbal and nonverbal language, the explanation is less a matter of sex differences than a matter of power differences![23]

There are heavy penalties and serious risks in tampering with symbols and myths, in general, and those sustaining power relationships, in particular. In setting the rules for Newspeak and social interaction, Big Brother does not stop at mocking or trivializing our work and the fight to liberate language and ourselves from oppressive institutions, rituals, and symbols. Violence and force -- rape, beatings, madness, incarceration, and immolation -- have been used against past heroines and those,

like Winston Smith in 1984, who changed language and the grammar of social interaction to redefine "herstory" and themselves.

Long before 1984, totalitarian regimes were aware that

> A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas.... On the soft fibres of the brain is founded the unshakable base of the soundest Empires.[24]

To release ourselves from restricted codes of thinking, speaking, and behaving is to win the responsibility of freedom!

Notes

[1]Sally McConnell-Ginet, "Address in Sexual Politics," Conference on Language and Style, New York, 16 April 1977.

[2]Lois Gould, "X: A Fabulous Child's Story," Ms. Magazine, December, 1972.

[3]Jean Berko Gleason, "Code Switching in Children's Language," in Cognitive Development and Acquisition of Language, ed. Timothy E. Moore (New York: Academic Press, 1973), pp. 159-167.

[4]Edwin F. Sause, "Computer Content Analysis of Sex Differences in the Language of Children," Journal of Psycholinguistic Research, 5, No. 3 (1976), 317-324.

[5]Jacqueline Sachs, Philip Lieberman, and Donna Erickson, "Anatomical and Cultural Determinants of Male and Female Speech," in Language Attitudes: Current Trends and Prospects, eds. Roger W. Shuy and Ralph W. Fasold (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 74-84.

[6]Marie A. Garcia-Zamor, "Child Awareness of Sex Role Distinctions in Language Use," Linguistic Society of America, December, 1973.

[7]Muriel R. Schulz, "The Semantic Derogation of Woman," in Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance, eds. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1975), pp. 64-75.

[8]Julia P. Stanley, "Paradigmatic Woman: The Prostitute," in Papers on Language Variation, ed. David Shores (Birmingham, Ala.: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1977), pp. 303-321.

[9]Robin Lakoff, Language and Woman's Place (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1975), p. 48.

[10]Annette Kolodny, The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1976), pp. 66-89.

[11]Alleen Pace Nilsen, Haig Bosmajian, H. Lee Gershuny, and Julia P. Stanley, Sexism and Language (Urbana, Ill.: Nat'l. Council of Teachers of English, 1977), pp. 53-74.

[12]Alleen Pace Nilsen, "The Correlation Between Gender and Other Semantic Features in American English," Linguistic Society of America, December 1973.

[13]Nilsen, Sexism and Language, pp. 143-159.

[14]Leonard Michaels, "Some Champions," New York Times Book Review, 2 May 1976, p. 6.

[15]Patricia Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art," Radical America, 7, No. 1 (1973), 64-68.

[16]Nancy Henley, Body Politics: Power, Sex, and Nonverbal Communication (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977), pp. 179-201.

[17]Lakoff, Language and Woman's Place, pp. 3-42.

[18]Cynthia L. Berryman, The Language of Women as a Reflection of the Image of Women in a Mass-circulation Magazine: An Analysis of Ladies Home Journal Fiction, 1900-1920 (ERIC ED 125 025), pp. 1-3.

[19]Cheris Kramer, "Stereotypes of Women's Speech: The Word from Cartoons," Journal of Popular Culture, 8 (1974), 627-629.

[20]John E. Baird, Jr., "Sex Differences in Group Communication: A Review of Relevant Research," Quarterly J. of Speech, 62 (1976), 181.

[21]Henley, Body Politics, pp. 179-180.

[22]Erving Goffman, "Genderisms -- an Admittedly Malicious Look at How Advertising Reinforces Sexual Role Stereotypes," Psychology Today, Aug., 1977, pp. 61-63.

[23]Henley, Body Politics, p. 187.

[24]Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison, quoted in Richard Locke, "In the Cage," New York Times Book Review, 26 March 1978, p. 3.

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